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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
KATHLEEN BLISS

6th March, 1946

DEAR MEMBER,

The Supplement published a few months ago (No. 245) on the Anglican report *Towards the Conversion of England* brought us a large correspondence, which showed the wide interest that is being taken in the subject. Whether we agree with the Bishop of Rochester or disagree with him, he has done the Church a real service in bringing the question of evangelism to the forefront and stimulating interest in it all over the country.

THE COMMUNICATION OF THE GOSPEL

At the beginning of this year a conference on Evangelism was held at Cambridge, presided over by the Archbishop of Canterbury and attended by seventy delegates of the Churches and inter-denominational organizations.

In the course of the conference a statement was made, showing from the conclusions of the Conference on Faith and Order and other published statements how large a measure of agreement in doctrine exists between the Churches. It met with no denial or qualification. If the power to evangelize is lacking it is not primarily because the Churches are in conflict with each other over matters of doctrine. Divisions on doctrine are often to be found more sharply within each Church than between Churches. The difficulty is not that a representative group of Church leaders of various denominations cannot produce an agreed statement of doctrine covering many important matters, but that when they have done it nobody outside the Churches is the slightest bit impressed. The problem is one of communication.

Here the sharpest division was visible in the conference. On the one hand, there were those who said that experience showed that when the Gospel is faithfully preached in traditional terms, men and women can apprehend it and will respond, and instances of successful evangelistic campaigns were quoted in support of this. On the other hand, there were those who said that an exposition of the faith which seems to Christians crystal clear and compelling is greeted by a predominantly non-Christian audience with blank incomprehension. "It is not that they do not want to listen," said Mr. Edwin Barker of the average audience from the Forces, "they are concentrating, they are trying to grasp the substance of what is said, but

it just goes past them." And on the same point Dr. George MacLeod said that when he spoke in universities, camps, factories and schools, he met " with eager attention when stating the problem and hinting at a Christian cure, and a deep perplexity fading into blank incomprehension when attempting in classical terms to state the message of salvation." The Gospel currently preached does not waken an answering chord in their experience. It looks to them much as some mediaeval treatise in demonology looks to us—it hangs together logically within its own premisses, but the whole of it is outside our frame of discourse because we think and live by different premisses. The difficulty is not solely, or even mainly, one of language. Vocabulary can be changed, theological terms paraphrased and the message still fails to get across.

If this is true, it is a disastrous mistake to suppose that what is chiefly wanted for more successful evangelism is improvements in methods and the use of new techniques. It is the whole classical exposition of the Gospel that needs to be re-examined, as Dr. George MacLeod vigorously maintained in what was, perhaps, the most challenging statement made at the Cambridge conference. It was the kind of statement that must either be shown to be wrong or recognized as a call to a radical change in our present methods. Dr. MacLeod's demand was for a " totally new approach," a new ecclesiastical strategy.

The fundamental reason, he contended, why the Christian message fails to get across is that those who expound it assume that Christendom still exists, whereas in reality it has disappeared. When Christendom existed, the Church had a limited function within a society in which Christian standards, even if not observed in practice, were generally acknowledged as binding. The Church was organically connected with every other part of the body politic ; new life in the h eart could flow quickly through the whole. All that has now gone.

One set of orders was needed for a time when Christians were like an army billeted in every house in the land. A quite different set of orders is required when the Church is in fact withdrawn into hedge-hog positions in a vast waste of incomprehension and of alien thought forms. If the Christian message is to have meaning in the conditions of to-day, it is necessary to offer men a more recognizable total community life. Christians must become more material, more matter of fact, more incarnational, before we can look for spiritual revival.

This means that the traditional order in presenting the Gospel needs to be reversed. The prevailing practice is to start from God the Creator, tell men of the redemptive work of Christ and lead them by this path into the experience of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

But since the content of our message has ceased to have any meaning for them, the only thing to be done is to begin at the other end by showing them community in actual operation. Something new must enter into their experience before they can understand the Christian message. They must find in our Churches in their hedge-hog positions a more recognizable total witness. But not only in our Churches. Christians must play their part in helping men to experience fellowship in the communities where they already are. When they have learned something of community life, and discover how easily and quickly natural community breaks down and suffers defeat, the door is open to reveal Christ as the way of reconciliation and the revealer of God the Creator and of His purpose.

All this may be understood in a sense in which it says nothing new. At what else were the social settlements of the past half-century and a host of social activities carried on by the Churches aiming? We know from experience how easily such activities can become secularized, and lose both theological depth and evangelizing power. In every generation the attempt has to be renewed to apprehend and declare to men the full Christian Gospel through its embodiment in a visible community recognizably living by its power, and the impressiveness of Dr. MacLeod's challenge lay in the force and conviction with which he showed that only a heroic effort to achieve this on the part of a Church which is theologically alive can secure from men to-day a real hearing for the Gospel.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE CHURCH

There are some people who are living in what they think is a deep shelter, when in point of fact they are in a glasshouse. When they are told that "we are living in a post-Christian era," they throw their hats in the air and exclaim "Splendid! We are in the same position as the early Christians—little groups in a unbelieving world, close-knit fellowships, making converts." The difference between a pre- and a post-Christian age is admirably expressed in the current phrase, "They've had it." When we say, "Come and try the Church," we are not inviting them to something new and unheard of, but to something which awakens images in their minds. For the Church is not hidden away, found in a cellar, reached by some long journey—it is *there*, and people know both the sight of the buildings and the people who frequent them. Nor is it only true of those who never intend trying the Church again, that "they've had it." What is far worse is that every week many men and women are honestly and sincerely trying the Church again and finding it even more irrelevant than they feared it might be.

Such a statement always evokes a defence; it is too extreme. There *are* growing congregations, though even in regard to them the

question needs to be asked, how many of the additions are in the true sense " converts." But that such congregations are to be found does not alter the fact that there are literally thousands of dwindling congregations up and down this country, so occupied with the question of survival that all adventure is impossible. One of the tasks to which we must set our hands in these days is to get rid of a good deal of machinery which is no longer necessary for the real business of the Church and often makes it appear to be occupied with an endless round of trivial activities. Closely bound up with this is the question of buildings inherited from the past. What many of us are engaged in defending is not Holy Church, but a manifestation of the social life of Victorian England in the form of buildings which assault the eye, break the backs of those who have to keep them going and obstinately refuse to fall down. A discussion of what can be done about this problem must be reserved for a future News-Letter.

Nor can we in all this escape the question of denominational divisions. The impatience of the outsider is well known ; it is both right and wrong. It often over-estimates the degree to which we disagree, and misjudges the issues upon which we disagree ; it also inevitably fails to see that bad as our situation is, we could easily make it a great deal worse. As anybody who has tried to mend china knows, forcible attempts to bring broken pieces together always create fresh and often worse breaches elsewhere. Our fathers were not fighting over trifles; to write off differences about the sacraments and Church order as negligible leads us insensibly to writing these things themselves off as negligible. But although a hasty sinking of denominational differences is not in the interest of evangelism, we may well ask what it really is that prevents four Churches in a town from working together as "the Church of the place." The question is whether we always see denominational differences in the right place. Many of them are psychological, some of them are financial. " We could not have the joint course of Lenten services which we held successfully last year and had planned for this year, because one of the congregations relies on the collections taken at this time to finance its women's work," said a parish priest at the Cambridge conference, and denominational differences at the parish level are frequently of that order. We may have a new opportunity in the new towns when they come of preserving varieties of order and worship, but at the same time creating *one* Christian community, exercising a consistent influence on the life of the place.

Yours sincerely,

Kathleen Bliss

A LETTER FROM THE BISHOP OF CHICHESTER TO HIS FRIENDS IN THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN GERMANY

THE PALACE,
CHICHESTER.
14*th February*, 1946.

MY DEAR FRIENDS,

Ever since my visit to Germany last October as a member of the delegation of the World Council of Churches, I have been thinking much about the Evangelical Church, with so many of whose leaders I have long-standing personal links. My memory travelled back to my first contacts with German churchmen at the meeting of the World Alliance for promoting International Friendship through the Churches at Oud Wassenaar in Holland in 1919; to the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work at Stockholm in 1925, with the regular meetings of the Universal Christian Council in the following years; and to the conferences of English and German theologians at Canterbury, the Wartburg, and Chichester.

In 1933 the door closed on our joint theological conferences. At Novi Sad, thanks to Reichbishop Müller, there were for the first time new German faces at the Universal Christian Council, and new voices tried to defend what our old friends could never have supported. When the Universal Christian Council met at Fano, Denmark, in 1934, an open struggle took place with the Reichbishop's delegates. Certainly none who was present will forget the two momentous decisions there taken: first, the public denunciation of the National Socialist Church rule as "incompatible with the true nature of the Christian Church"; second, the election on to the Council of leaders of the Confessional Church, in the teeth of opposition from the German delegates. All through, from 1933 onwards, I was in personal touch with some of the foremost men of the Confessional Church inside and outside Germany. I know something therefore at first hand of the courage and tenacity of their opposition to Hitler's attacks on the Church, and to Hitler's persecution of those of Jewish origin. There were some among them who were impelled by their religious faith to speak out on the wider questions of justice and freedom, like the signatories

to the famous suppressed Letter to Hitler, of May, 1936, the release of which to the London press cost one of its agents, Dr. Weissler, his life. There was also Pastor Schneider of Dickenschied, murdered in a concentration camp because he refused to give the Nazi salute. Indeed, the very act of standing up for the Christian faith in resistance to the National Socialist ideology and morality was to declare oneself an enemy and traitor to the National Socialist State, as the Deputy Fuehrer, Rudolf Hess, made abundantly plain in a letter he wrote to me in reply (11th July, 1937) to my protest against Pastor Martin Niemöller's arrest.

The intensity of the struggle was recognized by Christians of many Churches outside Germany, who did their utmost to support their brethren in the Confessional Church. Let me quote, for example, the Message of the Oxford World Conference on Church, Community and State, in August, 1937, to the Brethren in the Evangelical Church in Germany :—

> " We are greatly moved by the afflictions of many pastors and laymen who have stood firm from the first in the Confessional Church for the sovereignty of Christ and for the freedom of the Church of Christ to preach His Gospel. We note the gravity of the struggle in which not your Church alone, but the Roman Catholic Church as well is engaged, against distortion and suppression of Christian witness, and for the training of the young in a living faith in Jesus Christ as Son of God, and King of Kings, and Lord of Lords."

My friends, I feel it a duty laid on my conscience to recall these facts. You, who are the acknowledged leaders of the Evangelical Church in Germany in the day of Germany's defeat, are the same men who for Christ's sake refused to bow down to the Beast in the day of its triumph in Germany—the same men whom the leaders of the Churches outside Germany knew and trusted before the war. Our friendship is not less because your country, which you tried to save from madness and disaster, is now in ruins.

None of you can have harboured any doubts that the *Weltanschauung* for which National Socialism stood was the very opposite to Christianity and has borne fruit in crimes of a character and on a scale unprecedented in history. None of you will have approved of Hitler's war, so utterly inconsistent in its origin and its conduct with honour, justice and morality. And yet I can

understand the tragedy of the dilemma with which you, as lovers of your country, have been faced. If Hitler won the war a shattering blow would be struck against Christianity. If the war were lost, Germany herself would be shattered. With such an alternative before you, ought you to support the government in power, being Hitler's government, or ought you to resist it ?

Many clergymen and laymen, though personally opposed to Hitler and Hitlerism, nevertheless felt obliged to obey the State's command, and so to support the war. For them what the State directed in the political realm must not be questioned. They argued that Luther told them four hundred years ago to separate the idea of God's kingdom from all earthly endeavours to bring about temporal welfare, that there was a sharp distinction between religion and politics, between things spiritual and things temporal, and that questions of peace and war followed their own laws, which churchmen could not change.

Others resolved the dilemma in a different fashion. They supported their country at war, but with the determination to use the war to overthrow Hitler and come to terms with the Allies. Of this attitude Pastor Niemöller offers a signal illustration. In a letter dated 31st October, 1945, he explained to me why he had offered his services to Hitler when war broke out. Let me quote the following extract :—

> " The tragic situation for our souls and mine had fully developed by the year 1939 : we Christians in Germany were aware of the fact that we had a people and a mother country that we loved, and that at the same time we had no people and no country as long as it was represented by Hitler and Hitlerism. For a man like me in this state of mind there were only two possibilities regarding the war. (1) Should Hitler win the war, Germany would be lost, as Hitler was the murderer of her soul long before he became a man-slaughterer of huge proportions. (2) Should Hitler lose the war, Germany would be lost, because the other Powers would tread us down completely and would not treat us as they did in 1918. In this dilemma there seemed for me, as for thousands of Germans who loved their country, no other hope, considering that the war had actually broken out, but that the war might bring about the overthrow of the Hitler regime, which could be performed naturally not without the help of armed forces, and that through a new government we might come to a negotiated peace."

But there was a third attitude to the tragic problem which, I think, deserves an even greater honour. It was that of those who, feeling bound to choose between their country and Christianity, chose the latter without flinching. These men chose the higher loyalty, though they loved their people and their land. They would rather that their country were destroyed than that Christianity should be shattered. Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of these. "I must live through this difficult period of our national history," he said, when leaving America for Germany at the outbreak of war, "with the Christian people of my own country . . . Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security." He paid the price with his life at the hands of the Gestapo in Flossenburg concentration camp on April 9th, 1945. He resisted unto blood, striving against sin.

I realize the formidable character of the challenge with which the Christian in Germany was faced. I fully understand and respect in particular those Germans, men of the highest courage and integrity, who loved their country, but felt that they had no country so long as it was represented by Hitler and Hitlerism. For there was no question of Quislings in Germany, unless we called the Hitlerites themselves by that name; since it was they who were the real traitors to their country. But the challenge facing the Christian is formidable everywhere. Christian citizens in the Allied nations knew that the very possibility of the rule of justice depended on the overthrow of National Socialist Germany. The great majority took up arms without hesitation because their country called them; many of them with the further inspiration of the championship of humanity against evil things. But we too had our problems. Some were tormented by the thought of the cruelty and the vast suffering bound to result from a modern war and wondered whether, when all things had been considered, there could be such a thing as a "just war." Others, while convinced that fighting was a duty, were haunted by memories of wrong things done or opportunities lost between the two wars. There were also in Great Britain men who went against the general opinion of the nation on some particular issue in the conduct of the war. To take the bombing of towns as an example, questions

have been raised—I was myself one of the questioners—as to whether or within what limits such bombing was justified. It is difficult for us to tell you, without a proper weighing of all the facts, what we think you ought to have achieved. But, however that may be, we appreciate the acknowledgment you have made, in the Stuttgart Declaration, of guilt concerning the war—when you accuse yourselves "for not being more courageous, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently."

No country, or nation, ought to tolerate any political system like National Socialism. Wherever such a system is established, with its false doctrine of man, its disregard of the human personality, its placing of complete and irresponsible powers of life and death in the hands of subordinate officials, the awful horrors of the National Socialist regime in Germany are bound to follow. But —this is the truth on which I would lay all possible emphasis— the supreme remedy for National Socialism, for the spirit of militarism, and for all the terrors to which they lead, is the Christian Gospel; and those in Germany who can now most help the German people to achieve a new outlook are the clergy and laity of the Evangelical Church and of the Catholic Church. It is a special satisfaction to Churches in other lands that the Evangelical Church in Germany, as the Treysa Conference has shown, is now following the lines which the Confessional Church laid down in the time of Hitler's persecution. Am I not right, therefore, in saying that you, who still survive after the long and bitter trial, are the men who pre-eminently deserve all the confidence and whole-hearted support that we in the British Churches, and in the Churches of the world, can give you? Too many, alas, have perished, some at the very end of the day, in prison, in the concentration camp, or on the field of battle. But to you who survive, weary, hungry, burdened though you may be, and to the Evangelical Church in Germany under your leadership, we in the foreign Churches ought to give both spiritual and material aid to the utmost of our power. The main burden must fall on you, and other Germans, as side by side you take up your work of liberating the soul of Germany and rescuing the former Hitler Youth from nihilism and despair, by pointing them away from the cult of war and power and barbarism to their true goal of freedom and justice and equality in the sight of God. But we must stand by you as your brothers.

National Socialism in its German form has both a tragic and a diabolical aspect. History shows that, while a great number of Germans have been inspired by the highest ideals for humanity, too many have been possessed by a lust for cruelty, to which others weakly succumbed. There are multitudes of ordinary German folk who care deeply for peace; but history again shows a strong tendency in certain circles of Germans to glory in aggressive war, which, when it has reached a certain pitch, seems to carry the multitudes away. There are unselfish and truly heroic German men and women; but it has to be admitted that there is also a tendency among Germans to be so absorbed in their own sufferings as to forget that many in other nations endure the same or even greater sufferings inflicted by German arms.

Justice, however, demands, and faith in God and hope for the future demand, that we who are not Germans should confess our own guilt in this fearful common catastrophe. Not to go further back, we in Britain have displayed a criminal levity with regard to our obligation to defend order and peace; and, if the Germans have been intolerably passive in resisting the rise of the Fuehrer, there was a passiveness hardly less conspicuous or less open to reproach on the part of ourselves and other nations, and condoned by our Churches, as we watched the National Socialist system get its stranglehold on the life of Germany, and were too careless or too idle to take the military precautions necessary for Europe's freedom. Although no man's guilt goes so deep as the guilt of Hitler and Himmler, no Nation, no Party, no Church, no University, is free from some responsibility for the doom which has come upon us. As His Holiness the Pope declared on Christmas Eve:—

> "Who can say 'I am free from sin'? Those who exact to-day the expiation of crimes and the just punishment of criminals for their misdeeds should take good care not to do themselves what they denounce in others as misdeeds or crimes. Totalitarianism infects the community of nations, renders them incapable of guaranteeing the security of individual peoples, and constitutes a continual menace of war."

It is a just warning for the victorious Powers, in their occupation of conquered territory and their denazification of defeated peoples, as well as in their settlement of territorial questions and their reconstruction of political and economic life. To give the most obvious and vivid illustration of its meaning—how can the

victors, who have so consistently condemned the mass deportations of the civilian populations of both the Western and the Eastern countries by the German government, refuse to condemn mass deportations of millions of Germans from the East into a reduced Germany, or reconcile such action by any nation with the principles of humanity?

All have sinned and all are called to repentance. Yet with that repentance there must be forgiveness. Our Saviour teaches us to pray that God may forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. The order of international life must be maintained against the aggressor; and the criminal must be punished. But recovery comes not through retribution, but through the reaching out of the offended and the wronged in forgiveness and charity to the author of the wrong. That reaching out in forgiveness of itself heals and liberates. And it is just because it is " more than you can expect of human nature " that God makes it possible.

So I would say to you, my friends in the Evangelical Church in Germany, that we must all work with one another now on our common task. It is the task of the rebuilding of Christendom, the liberation of the soul of Europe, the renewal of belief in the sovereignty of God, the ending of the spirit of militarism, the training of the young in Christian principles, and the feeding of the hungry! You who have resisted have much to teach us in our Church life, where there are temptations not less dangerous. And may we not all accept to-day some of the lessons which the Oxford World Conference of 1937 taught—the concern of the Church with the problems of daily bread, of employment and of peace, and the combating of injustice and cruelty wherever they are found. This means that you are bound to take your full share in political affairs, with all men of goodwill, not as members of one special party, but as those who measure each party's programme by the Christian standard. There is an urgent call to Christians of all communions throughout the world, who believe the mystery of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation of our Lord, to work together on the common ground of care for the needs of the ordinary man, for fundamental human rights, and for the rights of God. This means that there is an urgent call to members of the Evangelical Church to continue to work together, not only with other Evangelical Christians, but also with members of the Catholic Church, on the same common ground in Germany.

There is one lesson, as it seems to me, that is important above all for the German churchman—the lesson of the subordination of the State to God. In its own sphere the State has a God-given aim, to uphold law and order, and to minister to the life of its people. But, to quote the Message of the Oxford World Conference, " as all authority is from God, the State stands under His judgment. God is Himself the source of justice, of which the State is not lord but servant. The Christian can acknowledge no ultimate authority but God : his loyalty to the State is part of his loyalty to God and must never usurp the place of that primary and only absolute loyalty."

Looking forward to an enrichment in the future of that friendship and trust which have been so precious in the past, and to a steadily increasing co-operation in our common task, and hoping for a new beginning in Germany and a new beginning in the world, in which the members of the Evangelical Church in Germany and all the members of the universal Church of Christ may join their work, their love and their prayers,

I am,

Your faithful friend and

servant in Christ,

GEORGE CICESTR:

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